BEST PRACTICES IN GRADUATE STUDENT RECRUITMENT

HR | HIGHER EDUCATION

Hanover reviews key trends in graduate student recruitment and best practices to help drive enrollment.

HR HANOVER
RESEARCH

INTRODUCTION

Whereas undergraduate programs have struggled with declining enrollments, graduate institutions have encountered relatively flat enrollment growth in recent years. The question at hand is will the drivers of declining undergraduate enrollment—high tuition rates, ballooning student debt, and hard to quantify educational value—slowly erode graduate enrollment as well. One early indicator of potential concern comes from international student recruitment which is experiencing a marked decline. In response to international student concern and possibly in anticipation of higher expectations for the value of a graduate education, graduate deans are placing a spotlight on diversity and inclusion efforts and harnessing data and technology to improve their overall recruitment efforts. Innovations in digital marketing strategies can offer more efficient recruiting techniques with measurable results. This research brief addresses trends in graduate enrollments, the enrollment concerns of graduate deans, and outlines three best practices to bolster admissions office success.
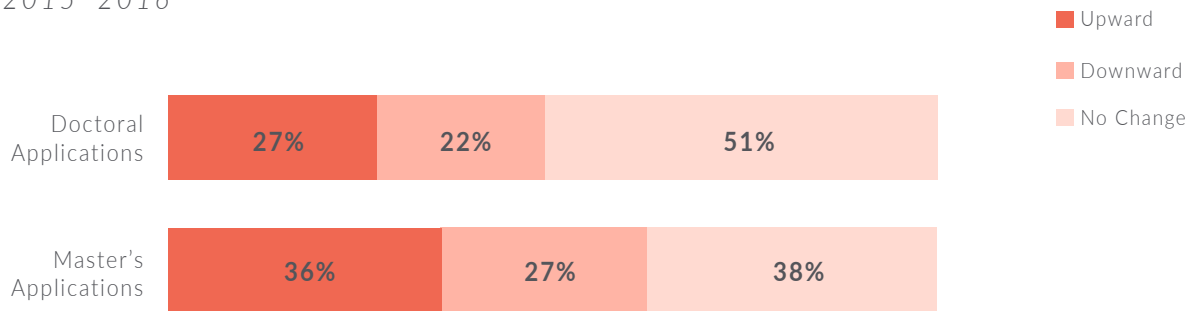
I. TRENDS IN ENROLLMENT

The overall graduate enrollment picture is fairly positive for institutions as graduate deans indicate either flat or slightly increased applications year over year.

CHANGES IN GRADUATE APPLICATION VOLUME

2015–2016

■ Upward
■ Downward
■ No Change

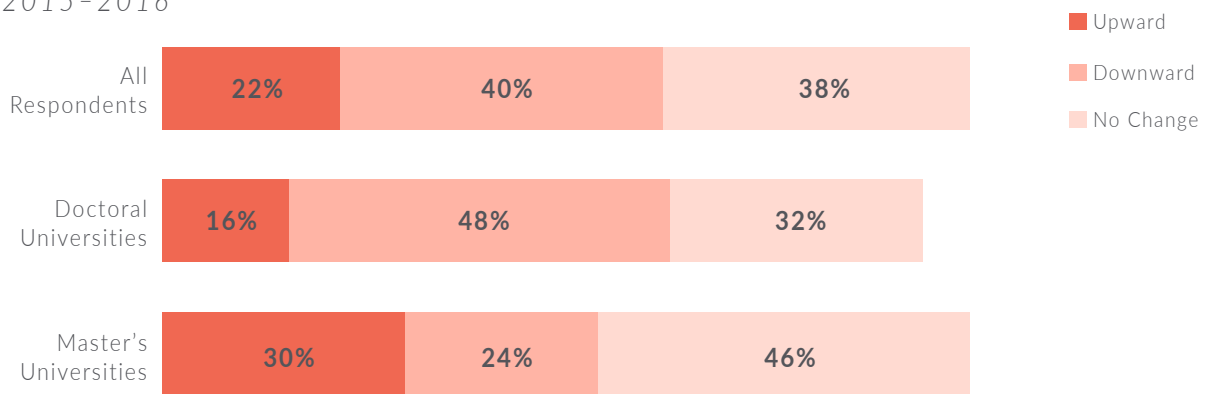|	Upward	Downward	No Change
Doctoral Applications	27%	22%	51%
Master's Applications	36%	27%	38%

Source: Council of Graduate Schools.

However, among international applicants, deans saw a decrease in application volume. This decrease was felt particularly strongly by doctoral universities, where nearly half of deans responded that they had seen a decrease in volume application. While precise drivers are unclear, prospective international students cite new and emerging U.S. policies.

CHANGES IN INTERNATIONAL APPLICATION VOLUME

2015–2016

■ Upward
■ Downward
■ No Change

	Upward	Downward	No Change
All Respondents	22%	40%	38%
Doctoral Universities	16%	48%	32%
Master's Universities	30%	24%	46%

Source: Council of Graduate Schools.

II. EMERGING ENROLLMENT ISSUES

With the decline in international applications, graduate deans anticipate spending a substantial amount of time promoting diversity in addition to enrollment management and funding. Of note, a divide emerges between deans at doctoral and master's universities. Deans at doctoral universities are focused primarily on promoting diversity and inclusion, whereas deans at master's universities have prioritized graduate enrollment management.

GRADUATE DEAN PRIORITIES IN THE COMING YEAR

65% — Promoting diversity and inclusion in the graduate student body

63% — Providing leadership in graduate enrollment management

61% — Securing institutional resources and support for graduate programs

51% — Securing extra funds for the graduate schools

50% — Securing funds for stipends and fellowships for graduate students

Source: Council of Graduate Schools.

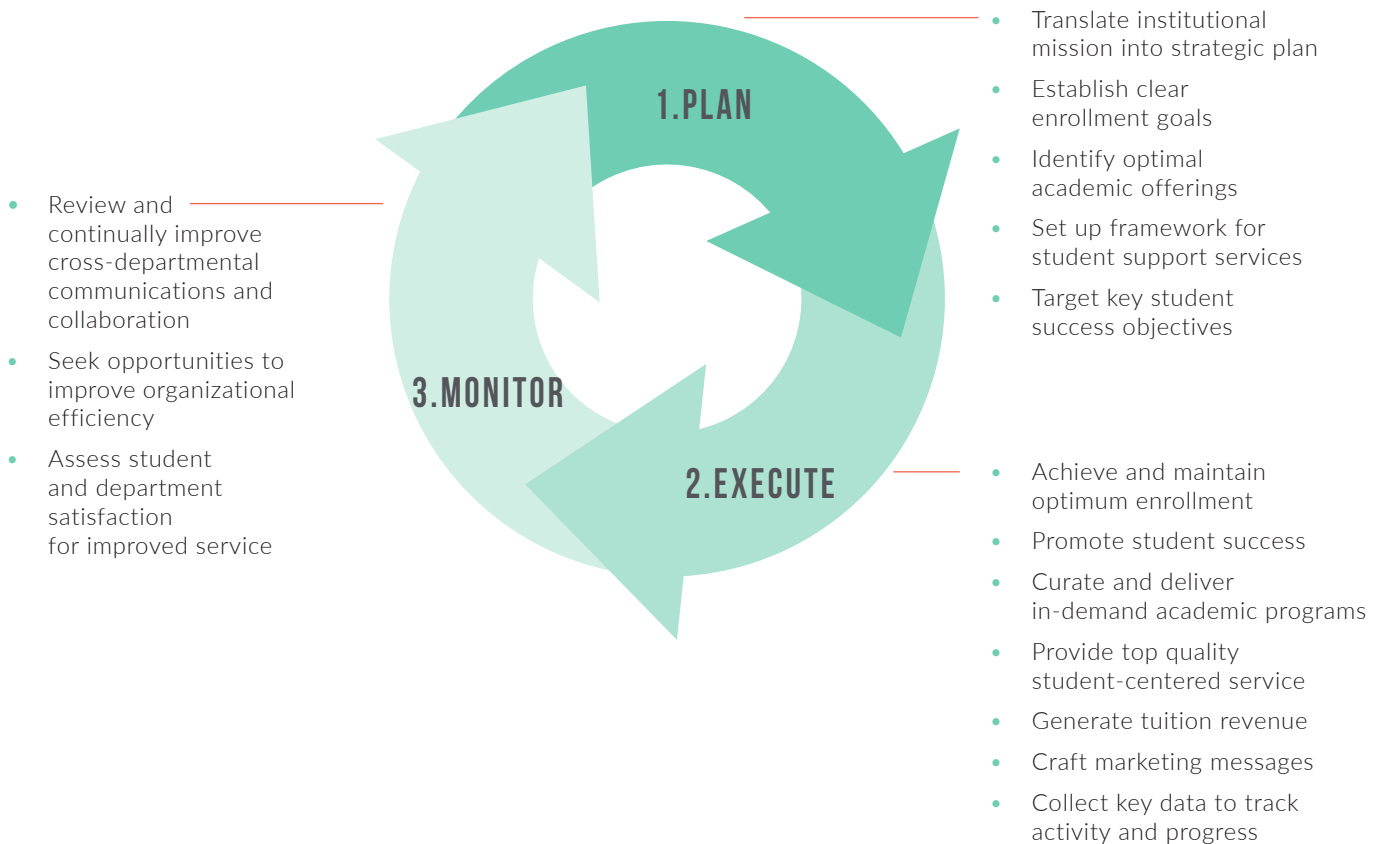# III. BEST PRACTICES FOR GRADUATE ENROLLMENT

In order to recruit and attract students who are a good fit with the university, graduate institutions are harnessing the power of technology and data. The following three enrollment best practices help institutions use data to inform their recruitment efforts, leverage social media, and successfully promote themselves online.

BEST PRACTICE #1: IMPLEMENT STRATEGIC ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT

Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) looks at the larger context for an institution (its mission, goals, and view on the emerging needs for skills and abilities in its students) and builds those considerations into the enrollment process, coordinating student recruitment, marketing, tuition and financial aid, academic portfolio offerings, and student support services.

STRATEGIC ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT

1. PLAN
- Translate institutional mission into strategic plan
- Establish clear enrollment goals
- Identify optimal academic offerings
- Set up framework for student support services
- Target key student success objectives

2. EXECUTE
- Achieve and maintain optimum enrollment
- Promote student success
- Curate and deliver in-demand academic programs
- Provide top quality student-centered service
- Generate tuition revenue
- Craft marketing messages
- Collect key data to track activity and progress

3. MONITOR
- Review and continually improve cross-departmental communications and collaboration
- Seek opportunities to improve organizational efficiency
- Assess student and department satisfaction for improved service

For SEM efforts to be successful, they require close collaboration across key departments and the organization of select data to track efforts and success.

KEY SEM PARTICIPANTS

WHO IS INVOLVED?

- Marketing
- Recruitment
- Admissions
- Financial Aid
- Student Services
- Academic Affairs
- Retention

WHAT DO THEY NEED?

- SEM organization
- Data mining and analysis
- SEM plan

Source: Strategic Enrollment Management Quarterly.

SPOTLIGHTS:

The University of North Carolina - Charlotte

UNC Charlotte's Graduate Enrollment Management (GEM) plan is designed as a collaborative process by an academically diverse group of representatives. Decisions are informed by data collection and analysis and aim to produce measurable improvements in recruitment, admissions, retention, funding, and graduation. The committee collects longitudinal data on graduate student enrollment and retention and has a publicly available list of peer institutions based on the data.

University of Illinois System

In Summer 2016, each University of Illinois System university created an enrollment management strategic plan, with the end goal of increasing system enrollment by approximately 15% in the next five years. The universities followed strategic enrollment principles, such as maintaining education quality, increasing opportunities for Illinois residents, and benchmarking with peer institutions to understand the competitive landscape. Additionally, each campus created their own strategic enrollment plan to reflect their different strengths and weaknesses. For example, based on its already strong freshman class, **Urbana-Champaign** is focused on growing graduate and professional programs.

BEST PRACTICE #2: PROMOTE INSTITUTIONAL AWARENESS WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

Regardless of marketing budget size, graduate institutions can utilize social media to promote awareness and drive enrollment. Two of the most common digital paid options available to enrollment offices are found in Facebook and Instagram. Both platforms determine pricing based on the target audience (e.g., location, age, interest), ad quality (based on relevance score and click-through rate), and time of year (e.g., Black Friday or holidays). Ads with higher relevance scores or click-through rates may pay less to target the same audience as competitors. Furthermore, Facebook and Instagram offer a variety of advertising options, but those that are the most effective at reaching students emphasize relationship building, maximize video content, and look as similar to unpaid content as possible.

SOCIAL MEDIA ADVERTISING OPTIONS

facebook

Promoted Posts:
Promoted posts allow institutions to pay to leverage existing Facebook posts. This option is ideal for reaching new audiences of potential students and inviting them to further engage with an institution's Facebook page or visit the institution's website.

Boosted Facebook Live Videos:
Facebook Live videos are extremely popular with students, as they combine the appeal of video content with the excitement of a live broadcast. Once the Facebook Live post has been made, institutions can promote it to new audiences, much like a promoted post.

Instagram

Promoted Posts:
Instagram also gives advertisers the option to promote Instagram posts. Institutions can select from three primary advertising options:

- A simple post with an image and a caption
- A carousel involving several different images
- A dynamic video

Promoted Stories:
Similar to the extremely popular Snapchat Stories, Instagram Stories are short videos that are widely popular among prospective students. Promoted stories appear in a user's feed along with their regular feed.

SPOTLIGHT:

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY
WASHINGTON, DC

George Washington University

George Washington University is increasingly trying to reach students through the social media platforms they currently engage in, targeting their advertising through YouTube and other social networks rather than traditional media such as magazines or television. This effort includes advertising specifically for graduate programs over not only Facebook, but also Spotify, a music streaming site.

BEST PRACTICE #3: IMPROVE WEBSITE DISCOVERABILITY WITH SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION

Many students use search engines to discover prospective universities. As such, an institution's placement in search results matters. While paid search engine advertisements, such as Google ads, can temporarily place institutions high on search results, institutions do not need to invest heavily in advertisements or have a widely known brand to rank highly in search results. Search engine optimization (SEO) techniques are approaches that manage web content in a way that can improve a website's rankings in search engines. While many organizations partner with outside firms to increase their marketing effectiveness, several techniques can be implemented by university personnel fairly easily.

DO-IT-YOURSELF SEO IMPROVEMENT TIPS

✓ Publish relevant content with an eye towards how readers might search for it

✓ Update your website content regularly to ensure your site has something relevant to say on any newsworthy or trending topics

✓ Use metadata when posting website content including a relevant title, detailed description, and relevant keywords

✓ Make the site link-worthy by using program keywords instead of "click here" for links within the text

✓ Use alt tags to describe visual media and improve its discoverability

Source: Hanover Research, Michigan Technological University.

IV. DIAGNOSTIC: GRADUATE RECRUITMENT CHECKLIST

Deans and other institutional leaders can assess their graduate student recruitment efforts using the checklist below.

DOES MY INSTITUTION DO THIS?

1. Build an effective outreach and communication pipeline in campaigning students.

Yes	No	
☐	☐	Institutions can create visibility by constructing an engaging and easy-to-navigate website. Highlight student accomplishments, the diverse student body, and clear admissions requirements.
☐	☐	Develop networks through the advertisement of degree programs, underscoring the unique aspects of the student population and opportunities available to students such as conferences, consortiums, and societies.
☐	☐	Respond to student inquiries within 24 hours, and integrate inquiring student data into a student tracking database for future use. Online Q&A sessions and "Live Chat" campaigns can also aid in accomplishing solid communication pipelines.

2. Provide substantial information resources and on-campus opportunities for prospective students.

Yes	No	
☐	☐	Invite prospective students to a summer research program.
☐	☐	Invite students to on-campus informational sessions. Top recruits should be invited at the same time to boost positive feelings and increase enrollment among prospective students.
☐	☐	Schedule individual meetings between faculty and prospective students. Provide social activities such as BBQ dinners or soccer games to allow faculty and students to interact and develop meaningful relationships.
☐	☐	Follow-up with students via emails and phone calls.

3. Create a strategic plan during the admissions and enrollment stages.

Yes	No	
☐	☐	Understand your institution's capacities to support ideal cohort and class sizes, faculty-to-student ratios, and average time-to-degree.
☐	☐	Identify holistic indicators beyond GPA for success in the program such as grades in specific subject areas, research experience, test scores, etc.
☐	☐	Track alumni outcomes to determine employment placements and debt-to-income ratios.
☐	☐	Know your competition. Release admissions decisions before your competitors.
☐	☐	Survey your prospective students who declined an offer to inform future recruitment.

4. Update online resources frequently.

Yes	No	
☐	☐	Keep the institutional website relevant and click-worthy.

Source: Arizona State University.

SOURCE LIST

I. TRENDS IN ENROLLMENT

Highlights from the 2017 CGS Pressing Issues Survey. Council of Graduate Schools.
http://cgsnet.org/data-sources-highlights-2017-cgs-pressing-issues-survey-0

II. EMERGING ENROLLMENT ISSUES

"Highlights from the 2017 CGS Pressing Issues Survey", Op. cit.

 "Highlights from the 2016 CGS Pressing Issues Survey." Council of Graduate Schools.
http://cgsnet.org/data-sources-highlights-2016-cgs-pressing-issues-survey-0

III. BEST PRACTICES FOR GRADUATE ENROLLMENT

TargetX CEO Tells Nation's Grad School Recruiters to Adopt Sales Skills and Marketing Mentality." TargetX.
http://www.targetx.com/news/targetx-ceo-tells-nations-grad-school-recruiters-to-adopt-sales-skills-and-marketing-mentality/

"What Is SEM?" Strategic Enrollment Management Quarterly.
http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1002/%28ISSN%292325-4750?mobileTemplate

"Graduate Enrollment Management." University of North Carolina - Charlotte.
http://graduateschool.uncc.edu/faculty-and-staff/admissions-recruitment-retention/graduate-enrollment-management

Strategic Enrollment Management and Planning." University of Illinois System.
https://www.uillinois.edu/cms/One.aspx?portalId=1324&pageId=651792

Columbian College Turns to Social Media for Graduate Student Recruitment." The GW Hatchet, *February 23, 2015*.
https://www.gwhatchet.com/2015/02/23/columbian-college-turns-to-social-media-for-graduate-student-recruitment/

"Best Practices for Successful Graduate Student Recruitment." Arizona State University.
https://graduate.asu.edu/sites/default/files/node_files/GradRecruitmentBestPractices-feb2017.pdf

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Contributions to this publication were made by the following Hanoverians:

Chief Content Officer: Anil Prahlad

Project Leads: Arabella Pluta-Ehlers, Amir Rasool

Contributors: Grace Gahlon

Editorial Team: Amanda Lockhart, Jamal Russell-Black, Jordan Wells

Designed by: Johanna Mora

ABOUT HANOVER RESEARCH

Hanover Research provides high-quality, custom research and analytics through a cost effective model that helps clients make informed decisions, identify and seize opportunities, and heighten their effectiveness.

THE HANOVER APPROACH TO RECRUITMENT

Hanover Research offers an integrated and customized approach to evaluating recruitment challenges. The issue of recruitment is unique to each higher education institution, and Hanover's team of experts will recommend a tailored approach best suited for the individual organization. Hanover's unique year-long partnership model allows for each recruitment project to build off of the previous one, producing more actionable results and more detailed insights.

HANOVER'S CORE CAPABILITIES

PRIMARY RESEARCH Survey design, administration, and analysis; qualitative data coding; in-depth interviews; online and onsite focus groups; digital ethnography

SECONDARY RESEARCH Literature review; best practices; environmental scan; benchmarking; demographic analysis

DATA ANALYSIS Descriptive and predictive analytics, including: student segmentation; linear regression; data mining; decision simulation; data visualization
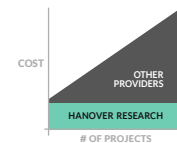
HANOVER'S MODEL DIFFERENTIATORS

EXPERT
Nearly 200 analysts with advanced research knowledge

CUSTOM
Every report tailored to meet a client's unique needs

HIGH-VALUE
Annual, fixed-fee business model

HANOVER RESEARCH

A NEW MODEL FOR INFORMATION SERVICES

CONTACT

www.hanoverresearch.com
P 202.559.0050
E info@hanoverresearch.com